

Maneuvering Entrenched Structures of Arab Education Systems:

The agency of Arab media literacy educators and activists

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The **Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut** (MDLAB) aims to develop, advance, and promote media and digital literacy education in the Arab region through the training of Arab teachers and researchers and the development of locally rooted curricula. www.mdlab.center

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How do you introduce media literacy to a whole region where top-down government structures control educational systems? ...where war, conflict, and terrorism occupies vast areas? ...where decrepit public education systems are dominated by nepotism and archaic curricula? ...where extremist ideologies and fundamentalism increasingly define the political culture? ...and where social and economic injustice, military occupation, political persecution, and authoritarianism are the chronic norms of the past half-century?

Before 2009, media literacy simply did not exist in the Arab region, neither as a university or school program, nor even as a concept discussed by the academics and scholars of the region. With the exception of a handful of individual initiatives at a couple of elite private universities, media and digital literacy were alien terms that guaranteed confusion and dismissal whenever broached in academic conferences.

In 2010, a small group of Arab academics and university students devised to introduce the concept to the Arab academic community. Members of this group had become passionate about media literacy after learning about it during their graduate pursuits in the US and Europe and through study-abroad programs, such as the Salzburg Academy. With the help of the Open Society Foundations (OSF) and the Arab-US Association of Communication Educators (AUSACE), a media literacy-themed conference was convened in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2011. The idea of building generations of critical thinkers and digitally savvy and civically engaged citizens resonated widely with the conference attendees. This was not surprising, given the event's coincidental timing with the debut of the "Arab Spring" and the spirit of hope that it carried during the early stage of the uprisings that swept the region and toppled authoritarian regimes.

But not all was rosy. The conference also brought

to the fore the tedious challenges of promoting and developing media literacy in the region. Meetings with faculty at the conference unveiled the three most daunting obstacles:

1. The lack of qualified faculty able and willing to teach media and digital literacy.
2. The dearth of media literacy curricula in Arabic that address Arab priorities.
3. Entrenched political structures that have subjugated the academic systems to serve as propaganda instruments of the state.

And soon after, the obstacles increased, as the optimism of the first stage of the Arab uprisings turned into desperation and hopelessness. As several peaceful uprisings turned violent and plunged their societies into brutal civil wars, and the few successful movements faced cooption by fundamentalist groups and counter-revolutionary military juntas, the importance of introducing media literacy to the region did not feature high on anyone's priority list, and its future seemed bleak. But plans were already underway and it was too late to turn back.

The *Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut* (MDLAB) launched in summer 2013 with the aim of addressing the aforementioned three obstacles. MDLAB's mission is to advance digital and media literacy education in the region through training Arab media educators and developing curricula—not only in Arabic, but more importantly grounded in Arab cultures and concerns, and helping academics maneuver their countries' higher education bureaucracies and obstacles to introduce media literacy to their societies. The idea was to bring together—every summer for three intensive weeks—50 academics, graduate students, and activists from various Arab countries and train them through lectures, workshops, and TOT sessions on media and digital literacy concepts and competencies. The hope was that these same participants will return to their countries equipped to teach media literacy at their colleges and schools and create a multiplying effect by advocating the merits of media literacy in their societies and training more compatriots to carry the media literacy torch forward.

MDLAB participants come from Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Algeria, Tunis, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Oman,

UAE, Morocco, and Lebanon. While all theoretically are “Arab,” each cohort looks more like a hodge-podge of contradictory cultures and political orientations, heterogeneous linguistic clusters, and a wide range of religious, ideological, ethnic and national identities. They included Shiite, Sunni, and Kurdish Iraqis; pro-government and pro-opposition Syrians; Christians and Muslims from throughout the region; Jordanians and Yemenis who mastered the Arabic language but barely understood any foreign language and Lebanese and Algerians who couldn't seem to put an Arabic sentence together without it being riddled with French and English terms; religiously conservative and traditionally dressed men and women who don't shake hands with the opposite gender and secular liberals who spent most of their free time exploring the Beirut pub scene and its hypersexualized beach resorts; digitally illiterate veteran academics whose perception of media education echoes antiquated theories from the 1960s and multitasking junior faculty and graduate students who can't seem to unplug from their mobile devices and social media apps.

The only matter they seemed to have in common was the tedious and often treacherous journeys

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they made to reach Beirut. Each academy, participants share their fascinating travel stories: the participants from Palestine who braved the agony of crossing Israeli checkpoints—including a guy who snuck through a Gaza tunnel to make it into Egypt—only to face even more discriminatory treatment by the Lebanese border police; the woman from Northern Iraq who had to drive for 12 hours through dangerous militia-held towns to reach Baghdad Airport after ISIS occupied her region and shut down the nearby airport; the cohort from Damascus who dodged mortar attacks on their drive to Beirut and spent eight hours at the Lebanese-Syrian border; the Yemeni participant

who, after Sana'a Airport was bombed, had to board a cattle-ship from Aden to Djibouti, where he spent 48 hours in detention, then flew to Jordan to face another 8 hours of interrogation and abuse before arriving three days late to Beirut; the Egyptian cohort, each of whom had to prove that they carry \$2,000 in cash at Beirut airport before being allowed in; and the Palestinian professor from Ramallah who spent over 12 hours maneuvering Israeli checkpoints and Jordanian

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security only to be turned back home at Beirut Airport after the border officials noticed an Israeli stamp on his passport. Somehow these stories of Arab countries discriminating against their own peoples unified the diverse mixture of participants, especially given the irony that the International speakers who mainly came from the US and the EU had the easiest time entering the country.

But these differences were not the main challenge during the inaugural year of MDLAB. With every lecture and workshop, participants grew more excited yet more skeptical about the relevance of media literacy to the Arab world at a time when the whole region seemed to be plunged into every political, military, social and economic crisis humanity can offer. The issue was that media literacy in the US and Europe mainly deals with problems of the developed world. Because the Arab region had a dearth of media literacy experts, MDLAB invited renowned international media educators, such as Renee Hobbs, Henry Jenkins, Susan Moeller, Stephen Reese, Paul Mihailidis, Sut Jhally, and Moses Shumow. The hope was that, with time, local capacity would become sufficient. The topics they covered, such as news construction, visual culture, the political economy of news, advertising and propaganda, representation of gender, race and sexuality, are standard topics in most US media literacy curricula. While most participants agreed about their importance, they did not see them as sufficient for the region during this period. This provided an early challenge for MDLAB to establish its legitimacy as a local organization, but it also offered an important opportunity

to engage local academics and activists and get their buy-in, while simultaneously guiding MDLAB's strategy and long-term goals.

Key to MDLAB's mission is the building of curricula rooted in the region, and the programs included several TOT sessions focused on devising media literacy syllabi and lectures. Each national group worked together on outlining the topics and objectives of the ideal media literacy course they hoped to introduce to their countries, and each individual developed a short lecture focused on one of these topics. The end result was a diverse archive of curricula built by locals who understand their cultures and educational systems and posted online in an open environment for anyone to use. More importantly, the participants had ownership of these curricula and did not perceive them as foreign programs descended upon them from the West. In addition, post academy analysis of these curricula and focus groups with participants over the past four years revealed important overlapping themes and needs for the region, including:

1. Adding topics and lectures relevant to the Arab world, such as media and religious sectarianism and fundamentalism; propaganda used by violent extremists; the relationship between media and terrorism; political propaganda during conflicts; rumor management in war times; media and social movements; media and religious and racial minorities of the Arab world; representation and stereotypes of Arabs in Arab media (not only in Western media).
2. Providing examples, illustrations, and case studies from the region to support lectures and workshops, for instance: ownership trends in the Arab media industry; media uses of Arab youth; cases of online surveillance and privacy risks from the region; dominant images of women in local Arab media and advertising; examples of racism and sectarianism on Arab TV; examples of cyberbullying and other media effects on children; case studies of propaganda used by violent extremists, such as ISIS;

local examples related to civic engagement and participatory culture.

3. Developing advanced technical capacities, such as social network analysis and data literacy, which go beyond the basic digital production skills.
4. Offering malleable curricula and exercises that can be easily injected into existing university courses and programs instead of stand-alone courses, and may be offered as workshops to activists, journalists, and civil society organizations.
5. Producing media literacy research, reading materials, and textbooks in Arabic.

While the list seemed quite long and partly disheartening, it nevertheless provided a roadmap for the future and helped MDLAB revise its strategy and focus on real needs for the region. More importantly, it provided participants with a sense of mission and concrete goals to pursue when they returned to their countries. However, the most daunting goal remained looming over everyone's head: how to maneuver national educational systems and introduce media literacy to their countries at a time of turmoil and increased state surveillance and anxiety?

The mission seemed impossible, especially for public universities that are directly controlled by the whims of education ministers who are more interested in political survival than in improving their country's educational systems. The first year of the academy ended and participants departed with doubt about the prospects of facing their countries' inflexible education structures. Even MDLAB organizers were not very hopeful. But news started trickling in over the next few months. MDLAB participants—the agents of change in their countries—were posting on social media news about workshops and seminars aimed at promoting the merits of media and digital literacy education for their communities. Soon enough, several private universities succeeded in introducing media literacy courses and modules into their programs. However, no advances were reported at public universities, which happen to enroll the vast majority of Arab students—in many cases over 95% of all college students in the country. Administrators did not see its merit and ministries were largely inaccessible to junior

faculty—the most passionate and energetic advocates.

During the second year of the academy, at the suggestion of former participants, MDLAB invited senior professors, chairpersons, deans and even representatives of education ministries from various Arab countries, as well as representatives from internation-



al organizations, such as UNESCO and UNAOC. They were invited to the last three days of the academy to engage in high-level discussions and witness their compatriots and students present what they learned. The strategy worked. These senior participants provided political clout and cover to the junior faculty and graduate students who were doing the legwork.

Then news suddenly came from Syria: Damascus University introduced a media literacy course. This provided an enormous push to everyone and a turning point for MDLAB. If a public university in war-torn Syria can do this, anyone can. A year later, Iraqi participants celebrated the decision of their education

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ministry to require media literacy in all Iraqi public universities. By the fourth year of the academy, over 30 Arab universities (and a handful of schools) had introduced media literacy courses and modules. All this was achieved by passionate local academics and activists determined to see media and digital literacy



flourish in their countries. In the process, MDLAB managed to create a network of academics, activists, and researchers capable of developing and promoting media literacy for their own societies. Their agency overcame entrenched impediments and outmaneuvered obstinate structures of the Arab world's education systems.

The media literacy programs they introduced are as diverse as the individuals who advocated for them. Nevertheless, all carried some of the tenets of media literacy that have been advocated by MDLAB, which resonate with the approach of a group of international media literacy academics tied to the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change, and who are sometimes referred to as the "Salzburg school of media literacy."

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These tenets include: integrating media literacy concepts and critical theories with digital competencies and production/composition abilities; contextualizing media literacy pedagogies within global and local issues of social justice and human rights; developing teaching and learning methods that aim for individual and communal empowerment and emancipation; tying media literacy to action through civic engagement, political activism, and the development of a participa-

tory and tolerant global culture; and finally promoting locally rooted curricula and disseminating knowledge globally in an open and free environment.

Conclusion: Where do we go from here?

Despite all their magnificent accomplishments, Arab media literacy educators still require massive support, and the nascent state of Arab media literacy remains vulnerable and threatened, especially by the same political structures that hindered its advance. The scenario of entrenched political interests co-opting media literacy to serve state propaganda and narrow political interests remain real, especially if the top-down educational governance systems persisted. The hope is to build a critical mass of educators able to defend the principles and values of media literacy and a resilient culture that is able to resist any attempted perversion of its mission. This requires generalizing media literacy to the whole educational system and beyond.

Therefore, next on the list of challenges is to help push media literacy into schools. While MDLAB has been engaged in helping some Lebanese schools, such as International College (IC), Jesus and Mary, and Al Kawthar, to build their media literacy capacities, many MDLAB alumni have been doing the same in other Arab countries. The Jordan Media Institute—a key MDLAB partner—is working on schools (and universities) in Jordan with the help of UNESCO, while other initiatives have been reported in Qatar, Egypt, and the UAE. Still, enormous efforts remain, and MDLAB hopes that by 2020 every Arab country will have at least one university and one school teaching media literacy and leading the effort to promote and develop it further in its own country.

Simultaneously, MDLAB hopes to help bolster the production of local media literacy texts, studies, and other intellectual and pedagogical material. This will require more time and major investment from internal and external players. A hopeful sign is the increased number of graduate students interested in focusing their theses and dissertations on media literacy. A possible key strategy in this area would be the establishment of local MA and Ph.D. programs in media and digital literacy—a matter MDLAB and its home university, the Lebanese American University, is considering seriously. ✱